

Launching Nonfiction Author Studies:  
A focus for teaching the Common Core State Standards with books by

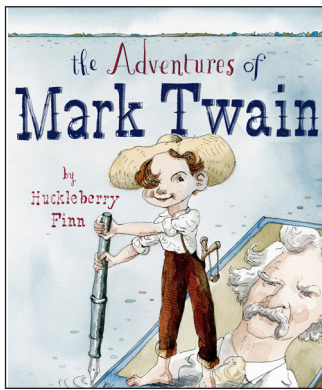
# ROBERT BURLEIGH



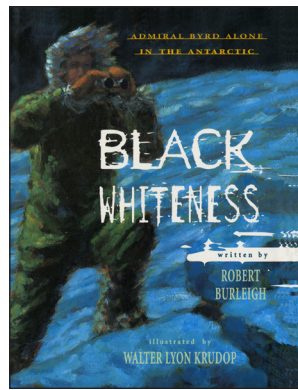
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## Books

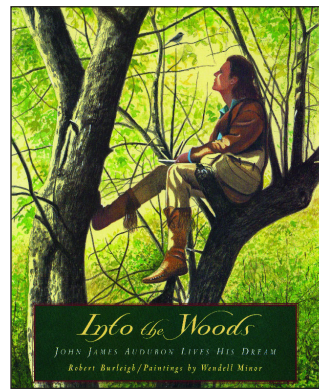
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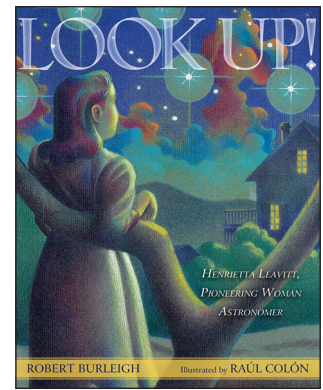
*The Adventures of  
Mark Twain*  
by Huckleberry Finn



*Black Whiteness:  
Admiral Byrd Alone  
in the Antarctic*



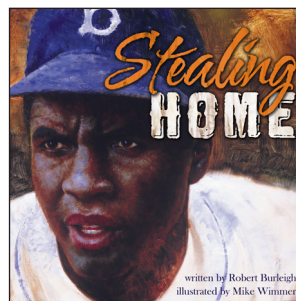
*Into the Woods:  
John James Audubon  
Lives His Dream*



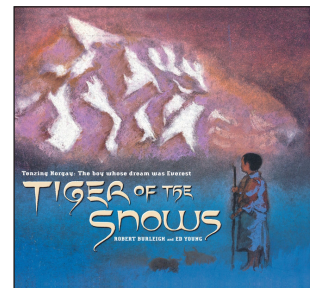
*Look Up!:*  
*Henrietta Leavitt,  
Pioneering Woman  
Astronomer*



*Night Flight:*  
*Amelia Earhart  
Crosses the Atlantic*



*Stealing Home:*  
*Jackie Robinson:  
Against the Odds*



*Tiger of the Snows:*  
*Tenzing Norgay:  
The Boy Whose  
Dream Was Everest*

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## Background Information

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Robert Burleigh's unique approach to biography combines both facts and feelings. He gives readers lots of information but also a sense of immediacy—of being there. Sometimes this means readers get the feeling of flying with Amelia Earhart (*Night Flight*). Other times it means joining Admiral Byrd in the Antarctic (*Black Whiteness*). Still other times it means joining John James Audubon on a walk in the woods (*Into the Woods*). In these books and others, Burleigh adds drama and feeling to biography. Many of Burleigh's biographies are written in free verse. In addition, two biographies quote directly from the journals written by the subject—Admiral Byrd and John James Audubon.

Books by Robert Burleigh can be used to show students that biography can be written in many different ways. Check out *The Adventures of Mark Twain by Huckleberry Finn* for a surprising approach. In this book Huck Finn (with considerable help from Robert Burleigh and illustrator Barry Blitt) tells us about the famous author. In addition, Robert Burleigh’s books have been illustrated by some of the best known illustrators in children’s literature: Barry Blitt, Raúl Colón, Walter Lyon Krudop, Wendell Minor, Mike Wimmer, and Ed Young. Take the opportunity to study additional work by these illustrators.

## Activities for Launching Your Author Study

CCSS Connection: The activities below focus on the craft of writing, showing students how techniques such as alliteration, simile, metaphor, personification, and repetition help create meaning (RL.1–3.4).

1. **Well-Crafted Language.** After reading *Night Flight*, find examples of how Robert Burleigh uses well-crafted language to describe Amelia Earhart’s flight across the Atlantic. Samples of five techniques—alliteration, simile, metaphor, personification, and repetition—are given below. Read each example aloud and discuss how the language makes you feel about the topic. Then find additional examples of each technique. How does the language used in the book help you feel like you were in the plane with Amelia?

- **Alliteration** is the repetition of initial consonant sounds. Here’s how the takeoff is described:  
The plane swoops like a swallow...
- **Simile** is a comparison of one thing to another, using the words *like* or *as*. Here’s how Amelia’s view from her plane is described:  
Mountains like wrinkles in the earth,/cities like toy blocks, cars like ants...
- **Metaphor** is a comparison of two unlike things that have something in common. The words *like* or *as* are not used. Here’s how heavy rain is described:  
Fists of rain pummel the cockpit windshield.
- **Personification** is giving human abilities and features to something that is not human. Here’s how a bolt of lightning is described:  
Lightning scribbles its zigzag warning...
- **Repetition**, or the repeating of words and phrases, provides emphasis and rhythm. Here’s how the early morning is described:  
It is 3:00 a.m. Hour of drowse and snap-awake.  
Hour of white knuckles...

Try using alliteration, simile, metaphor, personification, and repetition in your writing. What is the effect?

2. Using examples collected in Activity 1, fill out the chart on the following page. Show how the author uses well-crafted language to explain Amelia Earhart’s feelings as changing from **calm** during the takeoff, to **tense** during the rainstorm, back to **calm** once she lands safely. Write examples of phrases showing how this is done.

CALM (TAKEOFF)	TENSE (RAINSTORM)	CALM (LANDING)
The plane swoops like a swallow...	The blackness erupts.	The countryside spreads out like a smooth fan beneath her.

CALM (TAKEOFF)

TENSE (RAINSTORM)

CALM (LANDING)


3. **List Poems and Couplets.** Two biographies written by Robert Burleigh—*Black Whiteness* and *Into the Woods*—are told in verse. In *Black Whiteness*, one technique the author uses is a list poem. In the example below, he makes a general statement and then lists details to support it:

Cold, terrible cold:

At -50° a flashlight dies in his hand;  
at -55° kerosene freezes;  
at -60° rubber turns brittle and snaps,  
juice bottles shatter  
canned food from the tunnel becomes hard as a rock...

Try changing a portion of a biography into verse, using this list approach. Here's an example about Frederick Douglass, the abolitionist who was once a slave:

Freedom, Fabulous Freedom:

Frederick Douglass would not be owned by anyone.  
He would learn as much as he could.  
Reading and writing would be allowed.  
Being "rented out" would be a thing of the past.  
No master would decide his future.  
He would take charge of his life.

*Into the Woods* uses rhyming couplets, or two lines that rhyme. Here's how Robert Burleigh described John James Audubon's walk in the woods:

This morning on my morning walk  
I spied inside its nest a hawk.

I brought it down and home with me,  
Wrapped in a cloth, so tenderly.

Try changing a portion of a biography into verse, using a series of couplets. Here's an example about Frederick Douglass:

Frederick Douglass was not born free,  
But he hoped and prayed for liberty.

He always wanted to learn to read,  
And eventually he did succeed.

He planned to run away with friends,  
But that's not how the story ends.



## Why Author Studies?

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Beyond seeing the author as a person—a writer with information and a point of view to share—author study (studying several books by one author) provides us with a rich yet manageable way of looking at the decisions an author makes when creating a work of nonfiction. These decisions are about content, word choice, illustration, and original thoughts and interpretations.

Thinking about how an author creates nonfiction raises many questions for young readers and writers to think about: After researching a topic, what information goes into the book? What doesn't? Why? How should the book begin in order to grab the reader's attention? How should it end in order to keep the reader thinking about the topic? What information is best introduced through pictures, photographs, graphs, or tables? What features like sidebars and primary sources would add interest to the page? In what ways are the author's books similar? How are they different? As students engage in author study they think about how an author answered these questions.

Not surprisingly, these same questions are highlighted in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The Standards emphasize reading informational text to determine key ideas and details, an author's point of view, how the author structures and crafts information, how new vocabulary is introduced, and how visual material works together with written text. It's a match! That is, by engaging in author studies students are also meeting many Common Core Standards for reading and understanding informational text.

This guide features books and suggested activities that can be used to jumpstart a nonfiction author study. This will open the door to critical inquiry and focused discussion of informational text. By aligning activities to Common Core State Standards, students learn content while becoming critical consumers of that content. That's powerful instruction.

—Myra Zarnowski, Queens College, CUNY

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*Guide written in 2014 by Myra Zarnowski, a professor in the Department of Elementary and Early Childhood Education at Queens College, CUNY.*

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